

CONSERVATION CORNER

SWIFT PARROT *Lathamus discolor*

By Josie Pyle

Status

The Swift Parrot is listed as ENDANGERED under the Tasmanian *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* and the Commonwealth *Endangered Species Protection Act 1992*.

Reasons for Listing

Why is it a threatened species? The Swift Parrot fits the criteria for two reasons:

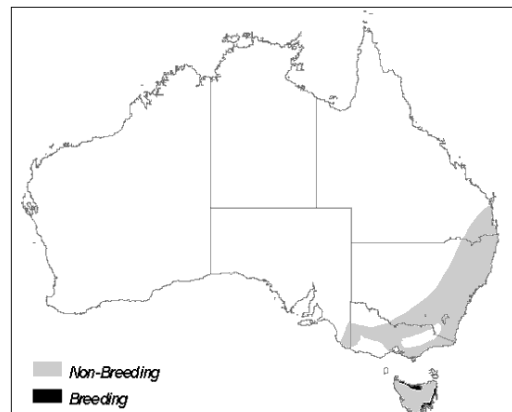
1. Its numbers are low and do not appear to be increasing. In fact, there is some indication that its numbers may be continuing to decline.
2. Another reason for the Swift Parrot's threatened status is its blue gum habitat is mostly on unprotected land and is disappearing.

Small Population Size

Reports from the past indicate that the Swift Parrot was once more abundant than its current status and that its range extended from the Mt. Lofty Ranges in South Australia to south east Queensland. Swift Parrots are now rarely seen in South Australia and are restricted to the Bordertown area on the Victorian/South Australian Border, although they are still regularly recorded in small numbers from south east Queensland. The total Swift Parrot population is estimated to be no more than 1000 pairs and is at best stable but may be continuing to decline, given the continued mortality of birds and the ongoing loss of habitat.

Current Distribution

See map to right.



Loss of Habitat

Swift Parrots only breed in Tasmania. They spend winter on the mainland, dispersed throughout Victoria and NSW. On the mainland they are semi-nomadic, often flying around in large flocks, foraging on flowering eucalypts and lerps (lerps are a protective covering secreted by some insects that feed on eucalypt leaves).

Prior to summer, Swift Parrots return to Tasmania to breed in old hollow trees. The birds mainly feed on the nectar of blue gum flowers (*Eucalyptus globulus*). Their breeding range is restricted to the areas in Tasmania where blue gums occur, which is on Tasmania's east coast.

Unfortunately blue gums have been cleared for agriculture and are continuing to be cleared. Also timber harvesting removes old trees so that the age of our blue gum forests is lowered. Old trees produce more flowers and nectar for the Swift Parrots and other nectar-feeding animals. Loss of old trees means there is less food for the Swift Parrots to eat during the breeding season and is the major reason for the Swift Parrot's decline. Old trees also provide nesting hollows essential for the breeding success of the Swift Parrot. It is estimated that approximately 56% of grassy Eucalypt forest has been cleared.

Description



The Swift Parrot is a small fast-flying, nectar feeding parrot, often seen in the company of lorikeets. Bright grass green in colour, the Swift Parrot has patches of red on the throat, chin and forehead, which are bordered by yellow. It also has red on the shoulder and under the wings and blue on the

crown, cheeks and wings. A distinctive alarm call of kik-kik-kik (usually given while flying), a streamlined body, long tail and flashes of bright red under the wing enable the species to be readily identified.

The Swift Parrot has no relatives in its own genus, but is related the broad-tailed parrots which include such species as rosella, blue-bonnets, Neophemas, the Red-capped Parrot and the Australian Ringneck. Although the Swift Parrot superficially resembles lorikeets in habit and form (nectar feeder with brush tongue), they are not closely related and it is accepted that the similarities between the Swift Parrot and the lorikeets have arisen through their nectar feeding similarities.

Feeding

Although the Swift Parrot's main food is pollen and nectar, they have the ability to feed on other foods, including lerps, insects and their larvae, as well as seeds, fruit including berries and some vegetable matter.

Life Cycle of the Species

Swift Parrots breed in Tasmania and on some of the Bass Strait islands, from which they migrate to the mainland between March and May, only to return to Tasmania in August and September. It appears that some birds winter in Tasmania, but no birds have been recorded summering on the mainland. During the breeding season Swift Parrots may share a nesting tree with other breeding pairs, but the exact details of the breeding cycle of this species is not well known.

Breeding Behaviour

The breeding period is from end of September to January; nests in hollows in tall eucalyptus trees near water courses; generally between 7 m (23 ft) to 20 m (65 ft) from ground; floor lined with small pieces of decaying wood; clutch 3 to 5 eggs; incubation 19 days; fledging period 5 weeks; egg measures 24.7 x 20.3 mm (0.97 x 0.80 ins).

Females are thought to brood alone, leaving the nest briefly in the morning and again in the afternoon to be fed by the male. The nesting period is long and only one brood is reared a season. Fledglings undergo a partial moult into brighter plumage at a few months of age, but do not acquire adult plumage until the following autumn.

Habitat

Birds are found in most types of timbered country where there are flowering trees. This often coincides with the winter flowering trees

favoured by the Regent Honeyeater. Suitable habitat for this species occurs in areas with winter flowering eucalypts.

Recovery Plans

What is being done? There is an Environment Australia sponsored recovery plan in progress for the Swift Parrot. This identifies the threats to it and the action required to reduce these threats and prevent the species from continuing to decline. One obvious thing is to stop cutting down blue gum trees. Instead we should be retaining blue gums and also planting them on the east coast within their natural range. Education programs have been set up to encourage planting of blue gums and there has been a good response. However, it will be a long time before they can support Swift Parrots. Much research is still needed to work out the big picture effects of blue gum flowering on Swift Parrot breeding success.

As with the Orange-bellied Parrot, the Swift Parrot is a good example of how co-operation between the States is needed to ensure the survival of a species. In Tasmania it is important that we protect and encourage the parrot's breeding and feeding habitat. Mainland States where the parrot spends its winter need to protect this part of its habitat also. Volunteers find and count parrots in mainland States and Tasmania. This helps to gather important information including identification of the bird's habitat.

References

<http://www.del.mtas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/BHAN-54GVV8?open>
<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery/swift-parrot/index.html>